

For information

Legislative Council Panel on Education

Arrangements for secondary schools participating in the Secondary School Places Allocation System to notify in advance the successful applicants of their inclusion in the lists of successful applicants for discretionary places

Purpose

Starting from the Secondary School Places Allocation (SSPA) 2020 (i.e. for admission to Secondary One (S1) in September 2020), the Education Bureau (EDB) will require secondary schools participating in the SSPA System to notify successful applicants of their inclusion in the Successful Lists for Secondary One Discretionary Places (DP) on a specified date before the Central Allocation (CA) stage. This paper briefs Members on the details of the above-mentioned new notification arrangements and reports the findings of the consultation conducted earlier by EDB on the arrangements.

Background

2. The prevailing SSPA System is divided into two stages: the DP and CA stages. During the DP stage, students may apply, without restrictions on districts, to not more than two participating secondary schools (including all public sector secondary schools and Direct Subsidy Scheme (DSS) secondary schools participating in the SSPA System¹) in January every year. Generally speaking, all participating secondary schools are allowed to reserve not more than 30% of their S1 places as DP² for admission of students according to their school-based admission criteria, and submit the Successful and Reserve Lists for Secondary One Discretionary Places to EDB in April. The CA stage

¹ Currently, there are a total of 55 DSS secondary schools offering the local curriculum in Hong Kong, 15 of which are participating in the SSPA 2019 (for admission to S1 in September 2019).

² Participating DSS secondary schools may reserve more than 30% of their S1 places as DP.

consists of two parts: Part A: Unrestricted School Choices and Part B: Restricted School Choices. Parents may choose at most three secondary schools from any school nets in Part A and at most 30 secondary schools from the Secondary School Lists of the school nets to which their children belong in Part B, and submit their Choice of Schools Forms to EDB through the primary schools their children attend. Students who are successful in their DP applications will not be allocated other school places at the CA stage. DP application results and CA results will be released concurrently in early July every year.

3. Apart from participating in SSPA, some students may also apply for school places in non-participating DSS secondary schools (NDSS secondary schools), which are allowed to draw up their S1 admission timeframes and administrative arrangements according to their school-based needs under the existing system. On the premise of effective use of public resources, NDSS secondary schools will collect from parents of students who accept the S1 places offered the signed undertakings together with the original copies of their children's Primary 6 Student Record Forms for confirmation of acceptance of the offers and surrendering of other S1 places subsidised by the Government (i.e. S1 places to be allocated through the SSPA System). A Successful List of Participating Students who have accepted the S1 offers for the next school year will be submitted to EDB by NDSS secondary schools in April every year. These students will not be allocated any places under SSPA.

4. Over the years, parents have been calling for earlier release of DP results under SSPA and through which, some would like to acquire more information for making school choices, including making reference to the results when making school choices at the CA stage. Under the existing arrangements, for some parents who have also applied to NDSS secondary schools for their children and have succeeded in their applications, they have to decide whether to accept the S1 place offers of the NDSS secondary schools prior to the release of DP application results of participating secondary schools. Therefore, these parents would also like to be informed of the DP application results in advance so as to make suitable school choices for their children. In view of the tight SSPA procedures, if official DP results are to be announced

earlier and CA results remain to be released in early July, the relevant work (including schools' submission of the first term scores of Primary 6 (P6) students to facilitate selection of students for DP by participating secondary schools, and verifying and matching the student lists submitted by participating secondary schools and NDSS secondary schools), has to take place two to three months earlier, which will be practically difficult in operation.

Details of the New Notification Arrangements

5. Starting from the SSPA 2020 (i.e. for admission to S1 in September 2020), participating secondary schools will be required to, after processing all DP applications, notify successful applicants of their inclusion in the Successful Lists for Secondary One Discretionary Places on a specified date before the CA stage. The related arrangements are administrative measures which are different from the official announcement of the DP results by EDB. The existing SSPA mechanism remains unchanged. Under the related arrangements, unless students choose to enrol in NDSS secondary schools, they will be allocated the schools which have selected them as successful/reserve applicants at the DP stage as usual according to the established mechanism when the SSPA results are announced in early July.

6. The related arrangements are summarised below:

- Parents who intend to apply for DP will submit applications to not more than two preferred participating secondary schools in January every year as usual.
- Participating secondary schools should conclude all the selection procedures before the end of March, and notify parents of successful applicants on a specified date. It is unnecessary for these parents to fill out the Choice of Schools Forms at the CA stage which begins in April. The new notification arrangements are not applicable to reserve and unsuccessful applicants.
- Each participating student will still be allocated a school place under the existing SSPA mechanism. Hence, if parents of individual students

receive notifications of successful DP applications from two participating secondary schools respectively according to the related arrangements, they will eventually be allocated with an S1 place in schools of their first choice when the SSPA results are announced in early July. Some students (including those who have not been notified as successful applicants or those who have been notified of their successful applications by the schools of their second choice) may be allocated with an S1 place in schools they have applied to at the DP stage (including schools of their first choice) in the capacity of reserve applicants.

- If the parents concerned have also applied for an S1 school place in an NDSS secondary school for their children and received an offer, they may decide whether to accept the offer within a specified period of time. If they decide to decline the offer, they may notify the NDSS secondary school concerned and retrieve the signed undertaking and the original copy of the Primary 6 Student Record Form within a specified period of time (i.e. within around one week after receiving notifications from schools) in order to retain the DP place which they have successfully obtained. NDSS secondary schools may admit other students in accordance with their waiting lists to fill such vacancies if necessary. They are required to submit a Successful List of Participating Students and the parents' signed undertakings to EDB before the end of April for the commencement of the CA stage in SSPA.
- All students will receive the SSPA allocation results (including results in the DP and CA stages) in early July as usual. Parents are required to complete the registration procedures with the secondary schools their children are allocated to within a specified period of time.

Stakeholders' Views

7. EDB consulted and exchanged views with different stakeholders on the aforementioned new notification arrangements from February to May 2019. The stakeholders consulted include the Subsidized Primary School Council, Hong Kong Aided Primary School Heads Association, Hong Kong Subsidized Secondary Schools Council, The Hong Kong Association of the Heads of

Secondary Schools, Hong Kong Direct Subsidy Scheme Schools Council, Federations of Parent-Teacher Associations from the 18 districts, Secondary School Places Allocation Committee and Committee on Home-School Co-operation. On the whole, the stakeholders generally agreed that the related arrangements could facilitate parents in acquiring more information for making an informed choice of schools and spare some of them the need to make school choices at the CA stage, which is in fact unnecessary. Representatives of Federations of Parent-Teacher Associations from the 18 districts and Committee on Home-School Co-operation supported the new notification arrangements for it could address the concerns of parents over the years. With the exception that Hong Kong Direct Subsidy Scheme Schools Council expressed reservation, the other four school councils/school head associations mentioned above either supported or kept an open mind towards the related arrangements. Individual representatives of school council(s)/school head association(s) and individual members of the Secondary School Places Allocation Committee raised some concerns and worries which are set out in the ensuing paragraphs.

8. There were views that the new notification arrangements could only allay the concerns of some participating students and their parents, but it would have an impact on the overall learning atmosphere in schools and create peer comparison and hence pressure on P6 students, in particular students who would not be notified as successful applicants form the majority. These students and their parents would probably feel frustrated and have untimely worries about S1 places allocation matters. Some stakeholders were concerned that there might be an impact on the mental health of some students who might also feel not accepted by their schools because they were not admitted at the DP stage. There were also views that the related arrangements would only benefit parents from certain strata or schools of certain “bands”. In this regard, we must emphasise that all participating secondary schools may provide DP under the existing mechanism. Whether or not students will be selected at the DP stage is affected by various factors, including parents’ strategies for choosing schools, the number of applicants, the admission criteria and weightings, and the number of school places, etc. Moreover, DP

only account for about 30% of the total S1 places. Most students will still be allocated an S1 place through CA according to their choice of schools. Therefore, it is not true that only outstanding students will be successful in their DP applications. All DP applicants and schools offering DP will be covered by the new notification arrangements. We learnt from the primary school sector that primary schools would encourage all students, regardless of whether they would be notified as successful applicants, to make their best efforts to prepare for progression to secondary schools. Explanations and support would be provided to students and their parents when necessary and students would be encouraged to stay positive. Furthermore, since there had been some P6 students receiving offers from NDSS secondary schools or international schools, etc. prior to the CA stage over the years, primary schools had already accumulated considerable experience in providing appropriate counselling and support to students with different needs. They expressed confidence in maintaining a good overall learning atmosphere. Representatives of the primary school sector pointed out that the related arrangements could allay some parents' concerns and spare them the need of making school choices at the CA stage, thereby enabling schools to focus on supporting students not notified as successful applicants to prepare for CA. The related arrangements could also alleviate the administrative workload of primary schools so that they could provide support for all P6 students in their progression to secondary schools. We believe that, under the new notification arrangements, schools will continue working together with parents to cater for students with varied needs as appropriate. We will also maintain close communication with schools on this matter and strengthen parent education with a view to allaying students' concerns and relieving their pressure. We also believe that students admitted at different stages of SSPA will definitely not be treated differently.

9. Besides, some stakeholders were concerned that schools might make use of the information about successful applicants for publicity purpose, thereby aggravating competition among schools. It is noteworthy that, under the new notification arrangements, individual students may be successful in their applications to two participating secondary schools at the DP stage.

They will eventually be allocated with an S1 place in schools of their first choice and some successful applicants may opt for studying in NDSS secondary schools. Hence, some students who have not been selected as successful applicants may still have the opportunity to be allocated DP (in the capacity of reserve applicants). In other words, such information/data is not the final DP application results. Students on the Successful List for Secondary One Discretionary Places of a school may not be eventually allocated to that school. In our consultations with the primary and secondary school sectors, we have reached a consensus that primary and secondary schools should not disclose such information/data to avoid affecting other students' strategies for choosing schools at the CA stage. As mentioned above, whether or not students will be successful at the DP stage depends on various factors. Therefore, the proportion of students who receive notifications of their successful applications to participating secondary schools is actually not an indicator of the academic level or the overall performance of the schools concerned.

10. Some secondary schools (including NDSS secondary schools) were worried that the new notification arrangements might have a negative impact on their admission and increase its uncertainty. In this connection, we must point out that the policy objective of setting up DSS schools is to inject diversity into Hong Kong's school system so that parents will have more choices. To meet this policy objective, DSS schools are given greater flexibility in various areas including school management, deployment of resources, curriculum design, student admission and fees collection, etc. to address the needs of parents flexibly, such as developing featured programmes to meet the needs of different students. As the admission targets of DSS schools are not exactly the same as those of public sector schools in general, and the related arrangements will not change the admission procedures or administrative arrangements of NDSS secondary schools, NDSS secondary schools can still admit students based on their admission criteria and timeframes. It is also believed that the related arrangements can provide parents with more information to enable them to choose a suitable school for their children with reference to their children's needs. We understand that the

related arrangements may have an impact on parents' school choices and their strategies adopted all along, thereby creating uncertainty about admission for some schools. However, all along in the past, parents made school choices and adopted strategies without knowing whether or not their children would be selected at the DP stage, while in general, parents would like to make informed choices. Hence it is debatable whether the past practice is desirable and the status quo should be maintained. We believe that parents would tend to be pragmatic and make good use of DP under the new notification arrangements, which will benefit both students and schools in the long run.

11. Some secondary schools were concerned that enquiries or complaints from parents concerning DP would increase if parents were notified in advance whether their children were successful in their DP applications, adding to the administrative workload of the schools. We would like to point out that the existing SSPA mechanism and procedures remain unchanged under the new notification arrangements. To ensure that DP applications are handled in a fair and just manner, participating secondary schools have all along been required to keep parents well-informed of their DP admission criteria, weightings and application procedures, as well as to put in place an enquiry/complaint handling mechanism. In this regard, schools are required to keep DP admission-related records properly for parents' examination as and when required. Given that the new notification arrangements will not introduce any changes to the existing SSPA mechanism, while the administrative arrangements may unavoidably involve extra workload as participating schools are required to notify successful applicants of their inclusion in the Successful Lists for Secondary One Discretionary Places, we believe the workload can be absorbed by schools given that the number of successful applicants concerned is limited. We will also provide guidelines and templates as necessary to relieve the administrative workload of schools as far as possible. More transparent school-based admission criteria will also benefit parents in making school choices in the long run.

12. On the other hand, there were views that the new notification arrangements should be extended to cover all or some applicants on the reserve lists, or the notification of DP results should be given by EDB after verifying

and matching the Successful Lists of all participating secondary schools. We understand the stakeholders concerned would like the arrangements to benefit more students and parents, however, we would like to point out whether reserve applicants can be allocated DP is subject to the actual availability of DP³. To avoid unnecessary misunderstandings and unrealistic expectations, the new notification arrangements will only be applicable to successful DP applicants. If the students are notified of the results by EDB, it is inevitable to create confusion and some people may misunderstand the results as formal DP allocation results. It also takes time to verify and match the Successful Lists submitted by participating secondary schools and hence there are practical difficulties in doing so in light of the tight SSPA procedures.

13. We note that Federations of Parent-Teacher Associations of a number of districts conducted a questionnaire survey to gauge the views of parents of primary students on the related arrangements in early May 2019 and have received about 9 000 questionnaires. The findings showed that the majority of parent respondents (about 85%) supported the new notification arrangements. About 90% of parent respondents considered that the related arrangements could enable them to make a well-informed choice of schools for their children. Regarding the impact on students' learning attitude and motivation, about 77% of parent respondents considered that there would be no obvious impact or there would be a positive impact if students were notified as successful applicants; and about 73% of parent respondents considered that students who were not notified as successful applicants would not be affected significantly or believed that students would be more positive than before. About 69% of parent respondents considered that even if some students were notified as successful applicants, there would not be any obvious difference or there would be a positive impact on the overall learning atmosphere at the P6 level in schools. Meanwhile, most parent respondents (about 72%) considered that they had confidence that schools would have adequate experience and ability to support students with different needs to learn with a

³ Students who have received notifications of their successful applications from two participating secondary schools will eventually be allocated with an S1 place in schools of their first choice according to the existing practice, leaving one school place available. If successful applicants relinquish the DP allocated to them and accept the places offered by NDSS secondary schools, the places allocated to them at the DP stage will also be rendered available.

positive and proactive attitude. Besides, while about 67% of parent respondents considered that there would be a short-term impact on the emotions of their children (for example, feeling defeated and frustrated) if they were not notified as successful applicants, and about 69% of parent respondents considered that their own emotions would be affected in the short term (for example, feeling worried), the percentage for those who considered there would be a long-term/profound impact was about 10%.

Conclusion

14. With the cancellation of the Panel on Education meeting on 14 June 2019, we have originally planned to seek Members' views on the new notification arrangements at the Panel meeting of 5 July 2019 but the rescheduled meeting was also cancelled. In light of the views we have gauged from different stakeholders, we will implement the new notification arrangements starting from SSPA 2020 in order to benefit parents and students as early as possible. We will issue a circular to schools on the new arrangements, conduct briefing sessions and update the relevant notes for parents, etc., which should be able to alleviate some stakeholders' concerns about the uncertainties arising from the new notification arrangements and the implementation details.

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